

# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



## John Kimball, Jr. 1783-1865

Born in Newbury, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1783, John Kimball, Jr. was the first of John and Susana Knight Kimball's ten children.<sup>1</sup> By the following year, the elder Kimball was working as an architect-builder in the Portland area, to which he moved his family about 1791.<sup>2</sup> Three years later he built a home on South Street.<sup>3</sup>

John Kimball, Jr. was apprenticed to his father, who taught him architectural design, carpentry, stairbuilding, and wood carving, all skills in which he would excel.<sup>4</sup> The first known project upon which he worked was his father's brick mansion for Hugh McLellan. Erected in 1800-01, this three story house at Spring and High Streets in Portland ranks among the finest examples of the Federal Style in Maine. The seventeen year old Kimball was responsible for executing much of the mansion's exquisitely

delicate carving in conjunction with Harrison Brazier, who is credited with the finish of the grand hallway.<sup>5</sup> Another commission in which he assisted his father was the New Casco Meeting House erected in 1803 east of Presumpscot Falls in Falmouth.<sup>6</sup>

John Kimball, Jr.'s apprenticeship ended in January, 1804, amid a period of great prosperity and growth for Portland. It is likely that he continued to work with his father, for there is no record of any independent commissions by him until after the elder Kimball's departure for Waterford in 1810. At the same time, Kimball continued to expand his knowledge of architecture through the purchase of English design books. In 1804 he acquired the 1798 London edition of *Pain's British Palladio*, and the next year he paid twelve dollars for the two volume *Builder's Magazine* published in London in 1800.<sup>7</sup> Both these works provided up to date examples of English Adamesque details which formed the basis for American Federal period ornament.

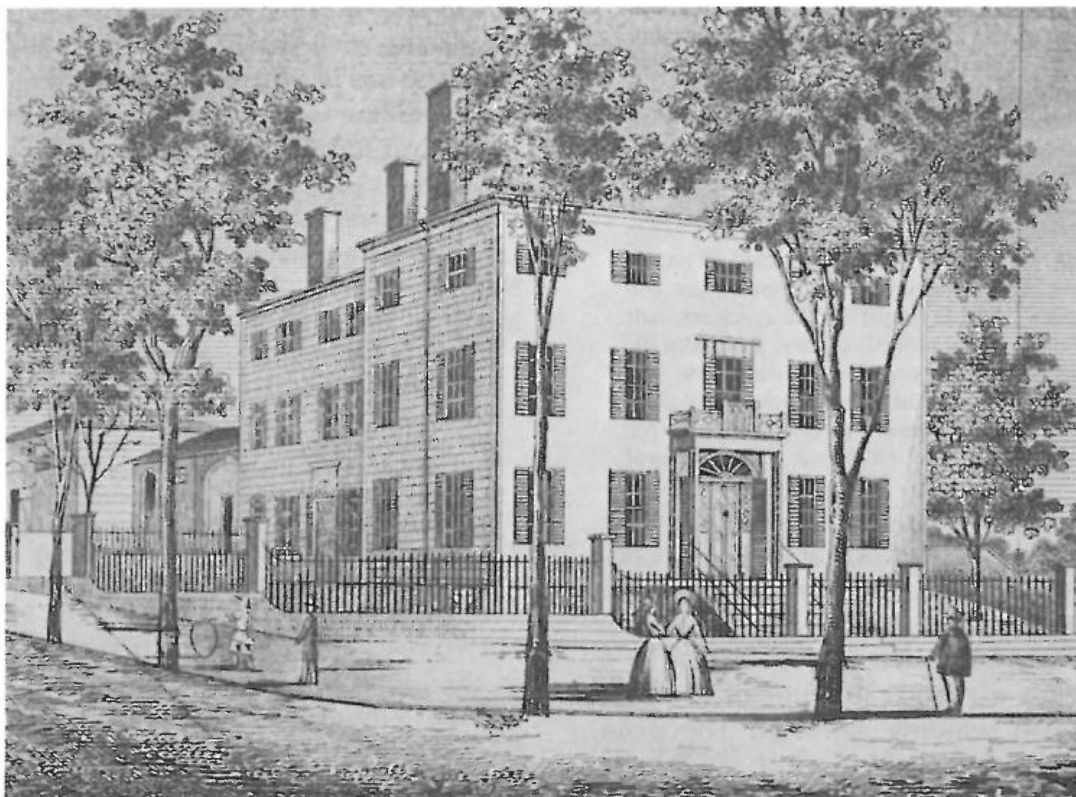


Figure 1. Jacob Cram House, Portland, 1858 view (MHPC).

When John Kimball, Jr. married Nancy Day on September 20, 1807, the Embargo of that year had already begun to spell a bleak period of economic decline for Portland.<sup>8</sup> Closure of the Atlantic ports brought a financial ruin to the town which persisted through the War of 1812. When peace returned in 1815, the community appeared much as it had before the conflict. Only about fifty houses had been erected in the interim. The major architect-builders, Alexander Parris and John Kimball, Sr. had both departed, leaving the way open for the younger Kimball to emerge as the leading designer and builder of the late Federal period.

Kimball's son William, who with his brother Charles was trained by his father, left the following account of how the family business was operated during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century:

I will illustrate this by taking my father's business; he was an architect, draughtsman, carpenter, and contractor. Then everything was done by hand labor. No labor saving machine was employed in any part of the structure. Circular sawing and every strip of board and plank were sawn by hand, as well as piles of mouldings, for more mouldings were used for interior finishing then than now. All were wrought out by hand. Hardware, wood screws, carpenters tools, window glass, and nearly every article in that line, save cut nails which quite recently had come in use, were imported.

It was the general custom to hire workmen by the month and board them; consequently my father had a large family. Those workmen who had families of their own of course boarded at their homes. Now let us see what the hours of daily labor were. In the summer time, up in the morning by four and five o'clock and away to work; at seven home to breakfast; then away to work. The afternoon was long, extending, except in the longest days, to dusk. On the fifteenth of September it was customary to commence to work evenings, and until nine o'clock. I recall to mind a shop full of men, each busy with saw and plane, preparing materials for buildings in process of construction.

My father carried on a business requiring a large number of hands. As soon as the bell sounded all hands suspended work and gathered at the spot where the youngest apprentice had brought on the crackers, salt fish and rum, this being one of his duties. Probably fifteen or twenty minutes was consumed at each time. My father had the grog furnished at four o'clock in the afternoon, without the lunch; there was no public call for this, as at eleven o'clock, yet I think it was a general practice.<sup>9</sup>

John Kimball, Jr.'s first known independent work was the Jacob Cram House of 1815 at India and Congress Streets, a typical three story hipped roof Federal Style residence (Figure 1). Its symmetrical five bay facade was punctuated in the center by a fan doorway with a portico in front of it and a modified Palladian window above it. The main house was two bays deep, behind which was a large three story ell and two attached structures, probably a carriage house and a stable. A sizable crew of eigh-

teen joiners, four masons, three painters, two glaziers, and a laborer were employed on the project, each of whom was paid a dollar and a half per day.<sup>10</sup>

In 1815 Kimball was chosen to design and construct the Cumberland County Court House in Portland, the most important commission of his career.<sup>11</sup> (Figure 2) Erected the following year on Congress Street at the head of Exchange Street, this handsome brick structure was the most ambitious public building of its time in Maine. Characteristic of Federal design, Kimball created a symmetrical composition with a strong central focus. A stone staircase led to a rusticated arched doorway which was located within a recessed arch. Above the entrance was a large window which opened on to an iron balcony. This center bay was enframed by pairs of monumental wooden Corinthian half columns which rested on stone pedestal bases and in turn supported a large triangular pediment with a somewhat curved triangular window in the middle. Above this was a balustraded platform supporting an open cupola surmounted by the scales of justice. Each of the two side bays contained a first and second story window. While the first story window was located within a recessed arch, the second story one was not. Both had stone lintels carved with the characteristic Federal keystone. Echoing the central bay, a monumental wooden Corinthian pilaster supported by a stone pedestal base was located at either corner of the facade. The court house roof was surrounded by a wooden balustrade featuring panels with the interlacing circle motif. When the building was enlarged by one bay on either side in 1830, the architectural detailing was carefully duplicated to match the original of fourteen years before.<sup>12</sup> (Figure 3)

Kimball's design for the Cumberland County Court House was widely admired and drew the praise of Chief Justice Parker of the Massachusetts Supreme Court. Judge Parker remarked of the building in the spring of 1817:

In external beauty, and interior accommodation, it certainly is second to none in the Commonwealth. The expense at which it has been erected is probably considerable; but the convenience it affords to the Court, Juries, Bar and Suiters, will remain perhaps for a century, while the expense will scarcely be felt by an individual of the county. In a large and liberal view, it is certainly economical to erect public buildings of materials which will be durable, and in a style which will be likely to suit the eye of taste for many years.<sup>13</sup>

Two years after the completion of the Court House in 1817, John Kimball, Jr. moved his family to Alexandria, Virginia, for three years.<sup>14</sup> Why Kimball stayed there between 1819 and 1821 is unknown. However, by the appearance of the first Portland directory in 1823, he was listed as a "joiner" with

a shop on Cross Street and a house on King (India) Street. In 1825 he built himself a two story frame residence on Cumberland Avenue.<sup>15</sup>

The year 1825 brought Kimball another major civic project, the design and construction of the Portland Market House, which stood in the center of what is now Monument Square.<sup>16</sup> (Figure 4) As originally built, the Market House was a large three story gable roofed structure with an open cupola at the southwestern end. While exterior detailing was restrained, the Federal Style was apparent in the arches on the second story windows, on the gable ends of the roof, and on the cupola. The first story was market stalls, while the upper section contained a large public hall.

Portland historian William Goold provides a fascinating insight into the construction of the Market House in the following account of an incident while occurred between Kimball and John Mussey, the designer of the First Parish Church of 1825:

After Mr. Kimball made his plan, which contemplated straight beams and a low third story, the military companies concluded that they wanted a higher open hall for drilling. The Rifle Corps' arms were not made for bayonets, but as a substitute they slung their rifles at their backs, and carried pikes nearly ten feet long, one foot and a half of which was a polished steel head—to drill with these or even with common muskets, required a higher room.

Mr. Kimball had had no experience in constructing truss roofs and hesitated about attempting it, as it was to support slate and it was a wide building. Mr. Mussey was in favor of the high hall, and commenced to make drafts and models, and finally settled down upon one which he was convinced would answer the desired purpose. To convince the doubting Mr. Kimball, he had a small model made in the proper proportion to bear his own weight, and mounted it—it stood the pressure and was adopted, and this was the first truss roof in town.<sup>17</sup>

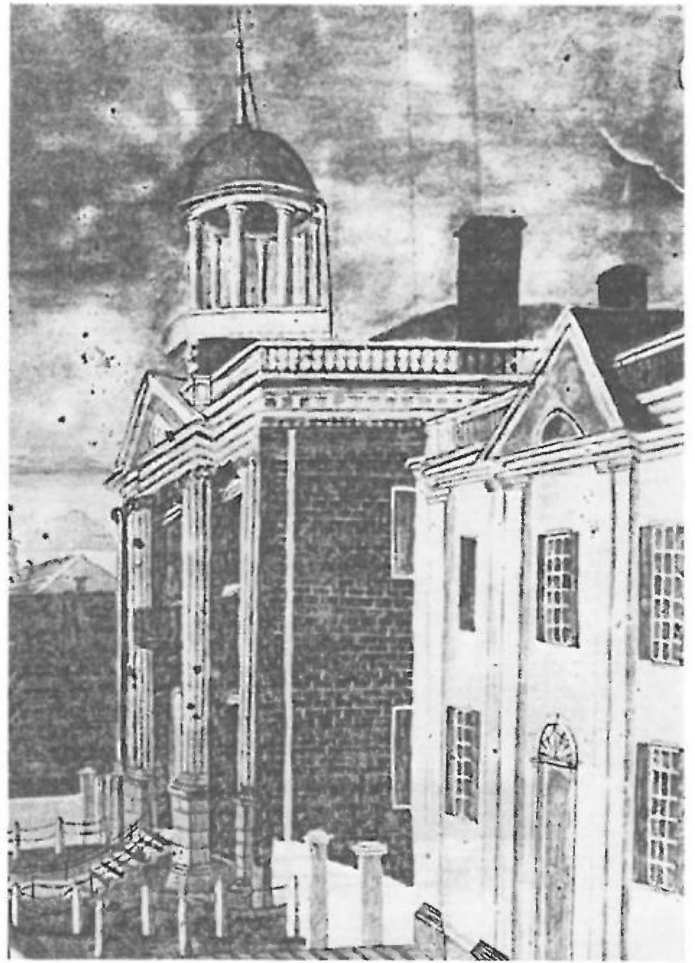


Figure 2. Cumberland County Court House, Portland, with original Maine State House at the right, c. 1825 view. (Courtesy of Berdan's Antiques, Hallowell.)



Figure 3. Cumberland County Court House, Portland, showing the 1830 additions, 1858 view (MHPC).



Figure 4. Market House, Portland, as it appeared from 1825 to 1832, late 19th century drawing by Charles Q. Goodhue. (Courtesy of Maine Historical Society).

Record survives of two other Kimball projects of the 1820s. In 1826 he was paid \$59.25 "for carving capitals and foliage" for the new First Parish Church as well as an additional \$10.25 for miscellaneous carving for the building.<sup>18</sup> The same year he signed a contract in partnership with the local housewright Daniel Robinson to build a three story brick commercial block for Henry Titcomb on the northeast side of Union Street. Designed to contain seven stores, the Titcomb Block was completed in December of 1827 at a cost of \$3,700.<sup>19</sup>

In 1831 John Kimball, Jr. left Portland again, this time for the purpose of farming in the rural community of Monmouth.<sup>20</sup> That year Nancy Kimball gave birth in Monmouth to the couple's thirteenth, final, and most notable child, the gifted landscape painter Charles Frederick Kimball.<sup>21</sup> The Kimballs' stay in the country was short-lived, for by 1835 the family returned to Portland, never to leave again.

Kimball resumed his profession in the city, receiving a commission from the rising young merchant John Bundy Brown to design his first house at Spring and Oak Streets.<sup>22</sup> (Figure 5) Brown's residence reflected the new Greek Revival style coming into use in Portland during the 1830s. An almost square three story brick structure with a hipped roof, the

house was planned with its main entrance on the west side rather than at the center of the Spring Street elevation. Instead of a Federal central hall floor plan, the first story featured a large entry hall at the southwest corner. Woodwork throughout the interior featured broad simple moldings with large corner blocks being used on the doorway enframements.

The following description in the building contract of November 1, 1835, between Brown and the housewright Ezra F. Beal, who worked with Kimball on the house, signals a departure from the traditional arrangement of principal spaces:

The first or Parlor story will be finished with two rooms on the front connected with sliding doors and one room on the east end connected with the East parlor with sliding doors. These three rooms to be finished in the best modern stile (sic) also a large entry on the Southwest corner including two stair ways leading to the next story, the front stairs to be circular and finished under the superintendence of John Kimball in the best modern style.<sup>23</sup>

Within a year after Brown's house was completed in 1836, Portland was struck by the Panic of 1837, which caused widespread unemployment in the building trades. Like the Embargo of three decades before, it would take approximately eight years for

the city to recover from this economic disaster. One rare opportunity for work in this bleak period was the completion of the Merchants' Exchange by the City of Portland. Begun in 1835 by a private company from designs by the Boston architect Richard Bond, the granite Exchange was the most stylish Greek Revival public and commercial building of its time in Maine. When the Portland Exchange Company failed because of the Panic, the city government acquired the property for less than half its cost in 1838.

Portland's workmen rejoiced at the prospect of employment on the Merchants' Exchange. The following petition to the city signed by one hundred and five of them on January 22, 1838, reflects the high esteem in which John Kimball, Jr. was held by his contemporaries:

It is well known that the Portland Mechanics have had a hard struggle for the last twelve months—little employ and poor pay have caused many of them to be hard pushed to support their families in a comfortable manner. —We believe that as good and faithful workmen may be found in Portland as in any other place, and it so, we hope mechanics will not be brought from abroad to build the public edifices of our city. We therefore respectfully pray, that in the erection of the contemplated Exchange Building, the preference may be given to Mechanics of this city, each to have a proportional part by the day or by small jobs—and that Mr. John Kimball, whose fidelity, skill, and science as a Mechanic, have been, for many years, tested in Portland, may be appointed to superintend the Joiner work in the construction of said Building.<sup>24</sup>

Kimball was employed on the Merchants' Exchange project from July, 1838, until its completion at the close of 1839. His work on the Exchange project marked the zenith of his leadership position in the building community. By 1841 the thirty-six year

old former joiner Thomas J. Sparrow had declared himself a full time designer, thus marking the beginning of the end of the long standing tradition of the architect-builder in Portland.<sup>25</sup>

While John Kimball, Jr. continued to work as a "joiner" and "stair builder" for another twenty-five years after the Exchange, there is no further record of his being called upon for architectural designs. During the 1840s he repaired the Fort Scammel Blockhouse on House Island in Portland Harbor and supervised the construction of the Fort McClary Blockhouse in Kittery.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, when the Third Parish Church in Portland was remodelled in 1847 from plans by Thomas J. Sparrow, Kimball was employed twenty-six days to make hand railings, for which he was paid \$46.08.<sup>27</sup> By 1856 he was listed in the Portland directory solely as a stairbuilder, the trade he pursued until his death on June 22, 1865 at the age of 82.<sup>28</sup> From a personal standpoint, he was remembered as "a great reader and had a retentive memory, was a Whig in politics, a member of the Baptist church."<sup>29</sup>

John Kimball, Jr.'s career is best summarized in a tribute written by William Gould:

He was an accomplished architect and carpenter and stood at the head of his profession while he worked at it. He was a good wood carver of which much was used for ornamental architecture in his time, both outside and inside. John Kimball, Jr. has left many artistic samples of his handiwork as a carver and architect. It was he who drew and ornamented the old court-house of 1816. It was a well proportioned and beautiful building.<sup>30</sup>

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr.  
January, 1987



Figure 5. John Bundy Brown House, Portland, c. 1885 view (MHPC).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Leonard A. Morrison and Stephen P. Sharples, *History of the Kimball Family in America*, Boston, 1897, Vol. I, pp. 143-44.
- <sup>2</sup> John Kimball, Sr.'s appearance in the Portland area is first documented by two 1784 bills relating to the construction of the Third Parish Meeting House in Stroudwater. These manuscript bills are in "Third Parish, Stroudwater, Scrapbook for Papers Pertaining to Building of the Churches of Said Parish, 1765-1864", Collection of the Maine Historical Society, Portland. Kimball's removal to Portland about 1791 is noted in Morrison and Sharples, op. cit.
- <sup>3</sup> The 1794 date for John Kimball, Sr.'s South Street House is found in the Rev. Samuel Deane's "Buildings Erected From 1784 to 1809," *Journals of the Rev. Thomas Smith and the Rev. Samuel Deane*, edited by William Willis, Portland, 1849, p. 411. Kimball did not purchase land on South Street until 1795, according to the deed of Edward Watts to John Kimball, September 1, 1795, Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Portland, Vol. 24, p. 209.
- <sup>4</sup> Morrison and Sharples, op. cit., pp. 273-74.
- <sup>5</sup> William Goold, "Old Houses and Their Builders—No. 7", *Portland Transcript*, May 18, 1892.
- <sup>6</sup> Untitled, undated newspaper article, Leonard B. Chapman's Westbrook Scrapbook, Vol. 1, Pt. 2, pp. 20-22, Maine Historical Society, Portland.
- <sup>7</sup> These two volumes passed from John Kimball, Jr. to his son William G. Kimball, from W. G. Kimball to his brother Charles F. Kimball, and from Mrs. C. F. Kimball to John Calvin Stevens. Stevens also obtained John Kimball, Sr.'s copy of *The British Architect* by Abraham Swan, London, c. 1760, which the elder Kimball gave to his son upon his departure from Portland in 1810 and John Kimball, Jr.'s copy of *The Carpenter's New Guide* by Peter Nicholson, Philadelphia, 1818.
- <sup>8</sup> Morrison and Sharples, op. cit., p. 273.
- <sup>9</sup> William G. Kimball, *Portland in the Past*, Nos. 5 & 6, undated articles, Maine Historical Society, Portland.
- <sup>10</sup> William Willis, "A Reminiscence", Undated article, Maine Historical Society, Portland.
- <sup>11</sup> William Goold, "Old Houses and Their Builders—No. 6", *Portland Transcript*, May 11, 1892.
- <sup>12</sup> "Portland Looking Up", *Portland Advertiser*, October 12, 1830.
- <sup>13</sup> *Eastern Argus*, Portland, June 3, 1817.
- <sup>14</sup> Morrison and Sharples, op. cit., p. 274.
- <sup>15</sup> William Goold, "Old Houses and Their Builders—No. 8", *Portland Transcript*, May 25, 1892.
- <sup>16</sup> William Goold, "Old Houses and Their Builders—No. 7", *Portland Transcript*, May 18, 1892.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> The First Parish in Portland to Nathan How and Henry Dyer, manuscript bill dated April 26, 1826, First Parish Church, Portland.
- <sup>19</sup> Articles of Agreement between Henry Titcomb and John Kimball and Daniel Robinson, manuscript dated June 1, 1826 and discharged December 8, 1827, Maine Historical Society, Portland.
- <sup>20</sup> Morrison and Sharples, op. cit., p. 274.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Articles of Agreement between Ezra F. Beal and John B. Brown, Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Portland, Vol. 148, p. 79.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> *Eastern Argus*, Portland, March 7, 1838.
- <sup>25</sup> Thomas J. Sparrow (1805-1870) came from a family of wood turners. He first went into the organ manufacturing business with John K. Paine, but in 1837 he was noted as a joiner in the Portland directory. By the next directory in 1841, he was listed as an architect.
- <sup>26</sup> William G. Kimball, "The Block House Near Fort Scammel", *Portland Daily Press*, March 22, 1883.
- <sup>27</sup> Building Committee of the Third Parish to John Kimball, manuscript bill dated January 5, 1848, Maine Historical Society, Portland.
- <sup>28</sup> Morrison and Sharples, op. cit., p. 273.
- <sup>29</sup> Morrison and Sharples, op. cit., p. 274.
- <sup>30</sup> William Goold, "Old Houses and Their Builders—No. 6", *Portland Transcript*, May 11, 1892.

## LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY JOHN KIMBALL, JR.

Jacob Cram House, India and Congress Streets, Portland, 1815, Destroyed.  
 Cumberland County Court House, Congress Street, Portland, 1816, Destroyed.  
 John Kimball, Jr. House, Cumberland Avenue, Portland, 1825, Destroyed.  
 Portland Market House, Market (Monument) Square, Portland, 1825, Destroyed.  
 Henry Titcomb Block, Union Street, Portland, 1826-27, Destroyed.  
 John Bundy Brown House, Spring and Oak Streets, Portland, 1835-36, Destroyed.

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